An Excerpt from Philo's On the Confusion of Tongues

XII.

(47)

For they do in peace every thing that is done in war; they plunder, they ravage, they drag into slavery, they carry off booty, they lay waste, they behave insolently, they assault, they destroy, they pollute, they murder treacherously, they murder openly if they are the more powerful;

(48)

for every one of them, proposing to himself riches or glory as his object, aims all the actions of his life as so many arrows at it, and neglects equality, and pursues inequality, and repudiates associations, and labours to acquire to himself all the possessions together properly belonging to every one;

he is a misanthrope and a hater of all his fellows, making a hypocritical pretence of benevolence, being a companion of a bastard kind of flattery, an enemy of genuine friendship, a foe to truth, a champion of falsehood, slow to do good, swift to do injury, very ready to calumniate, very slow to defend, clever at deceiving, most perjured, most faithless, a slave of anger, yielding to pleasure, a guardian of all that is evil, a destroyer of all that is good.

[...]

XIV.

(60)

But those who conspired to commit injustice, he says, “having come from the east, found a plain in the land of Shinar, and dwelt there;”[1] speaking most strictly in accordance with nature.

For there is a twofold kind of dawning in the soul, the one of a better sort, the other of a worse.

That is the better sort, when the light of the virtues shines forth like the beams of the sun; and that is the worse kind, when they are overshadowed, and the vices show forth.

(61)

Now, the following is an example of the former kind: “And God planted a paradise in Eden, toward the east,”[2] not of terrestrial but of celestial plants, which the planter caused to spring up from the incorporeal light which exists around him, in such a way as to be for ever inextinguishable.

(62)

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[1] "When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there." {16}{Genesis 11:2.}

[2] "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,[f] and placed there the man whom he had formed." {17}{Genesis 2:8.}

I have also heard of one of the companions of Moses having uttered such a speech as this: “Behold, a man whose name is the East!”[3]

A very novel appellation indeed, if you consider it as spoken of a man who is compounded of body and soul; but if you look upon it as applied to that incorporeal being who in no respect differs from the divine image, you will then agree that the name of the east has been given to him with great felicity.

(63)

For the Father of the universe has caused him to spring up as the eldest son, whom, in another passage, he calls the firstborn; and he who is thus born, imitating the ways of his father, has formed such and such species, looking to his archetypal patterns.

XV.

(64)

But an example of the worse kind of dawning is afforded by the words used by the man who was willing “to curse the people who were blessed by God.”[4]

For he also is represented as dwelling in the east. And this dawning, having the same name as the former one, has nevertheless an opposite nature to it, and is continually at war with it.

(65)

For Balaam says, “Balak sent for me out of Mesopotamia, from the mountains of the east, saying, Come, curse me the people whom God doth not curse.”

But the name of Balak, being interpreted means, “void of sense;” a very felicitous name.

For how can it be otherwise than shocking to hope to deceive the living God, and to turn aside his most enduring and firmly established counsels by the sophistical devices of men?

(66)

On this account he is represented as living in Mesopotamia, for his mind is overwhelmed as in the middle of the depth of the river, and is not able to emerge and to swim away.

And this condition is the dawning of folly and the setting of sound reason.

(67)

They, then, who are tuned in an inharmonious symphony are said to be moved from the east.

Is this, then, the east according to wickedness?

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[3] {18}{Zechariah 6:12.}

[4] "How can I lay a curse on the one whom God has not cursed?" {19}{Numbers 23:7.}

But the dawning in accordance with virtue is described as a complete separation, and the motion from the dawning according to vice is a united one, as when the hands are moved, not separately and disjunctively, but in a certain harmony and connection with the whole body.

(68)

For folly is to the wicked man the beginning of his energy in the works which are contrary to nature, that is, of his approach to the region of wickedness.

But all those who have quitted the region of virtue, and have set forth to go over to folly, have found a most appropriate place in which they dwell, which is called in the Hebrew language Shinar.

And Shinar in Greek, is called “shaking;”

(69)

for the whole life of the wicked is shaken, and agitated, and torn to pieces, being always kept in a state of commotion and confusion, and having no trace of any genuine good laid up in itself.

For as everything which is not held together by close union, falls out of what is violently shaken, in the very same manner, it seems to me, that the soul is shaken of every man who associates with others for the purpose of doing wrong;

for he casts away every appearance of good, so that no shadow or image of it ever appears.